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WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN THE ACTIVITIES OF RURAL WOMEN SCHOOLS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SOME PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS; THE CASE OF UMALQURA VILLAGE IN GEZIRA STATE, SUDAN

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Abstract:

Rural Women Schools (RWS) has been advertised and adopted by many development agencies as an effective approach to build women's capacities in developing countries. The Sudanese government adopted RWS to promote rural development and strengthen disadvantaged groups of women in many parts of the country. A program was implemented in Umalqura village in Gezira State to increase women's level of knowledge in home economics, human health, environmental health and mitigation of bad habits. This study adopted a full count sampling method (census) to assess the level of women participation in the training activities and its relationship with some of the characteristics of the participant women. Data was collected by questionnaires and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics methods. Socio-demographic background of the participating women reflects that majority of them were housewives lying in the age of 20-50 with primary and secondary education. Results show that, about two thirds of women participated in all implemented activities. However, project effectiveness, changes in knowledge and skills of the participating women were moderately and substantially correlated (r= .330 and .645 respectively) with the level of participation in the project activities. However, women with larger family size were less participating in the activities and therefore, they were less benefiting from the activities. Environmental awareness raising and frequency of participation in activities were positively correlated(r=.129). Income was positively correlated with participation in the RWS but with low correlation coefficient (r=.11). The study thus, concludes that RWS approach would give greater development impact if it will be widely adopted for development projects targeting women.

Keywords: Food Processing, Bad Habits, Participation.

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Introduction:

Women are the main food producers in developing countries. They are leading many local private commercial agri-business and smallholder firms. Many development initiatives in rural developing world consider women as a key player in running households and make major contributions to agricultural production. But the inequalities that exist between women and men make it difficult for women to fulfill their potential. Women are basically the most fragile group among rural population[1]. In many developing countries, women in addition to their role food production are also responsible for family activities such as cooking, and those activities are often made in wood stoves, thereby increasing their health risk[2].

Literature has shown that, women are promoting the rapid destruction of ecosystems which in turn increases the conflicts and displacements affecting the poor rural fragile African population[3]. Literature concludes that promoting a sense of participation, responsibility and active cooperation among rural women along with strengthening self-confidence and empowering their role in paying attention to environmental issues by forming local self-help groups and seeking support from relevant institutions lead to building women confidence in their ability to pay attention to environmental protection[4].

The empirical shift in basic assumptions about farm and rural household development also implies that the role of women, siblings and farm workers could necessarily be included in socioeconomic research[5]. The International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2011 reported that most rural women are not well educated, as 86.5% of rural women do not have any vocational skills[6]. However, theoretical references in development literature suggests that, if women have improved access to productive resources with developed knowledge and skills, they would play vital role in sustaining better livelihood for their families and dependents, especially in the case of women headed or female headed households.

It is un debatable that, whether they do paid or unpaid work, women's contributions are critical to their communities. However, they face multiple challenges to access methods of agricultural development such as training, inputs, and land. These barriers not only prevent women from reaching their full potential but also cost their communities.

Establishing of Rural Women Schools (RWS) comes within the framework of the Ministry of Agriculture to enhance the capabilities of rural women with the aims to contribute to achieving rural development, increasing the levels of production, raising environmental awareness, educating, empowering, and providing women with the necessary skills to improve their economic and social conditions.

The idea of RWS was first implemented in Sudan in the season 1995-1996 under the Integrated Pests Management (IPM) Project in Gezira scheme[7]. Driven by the successes achieved in changing in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the members of these schools, the Ministry of Agriculture expanded the project. The project therefore was implemented in several states including Darfur States[8].

Research problem:

The problem of this research comes from the fact that after expansion of RWS as a rural development approach, there is a growing need to examine level of participation and therefore, the coherence and relevance of these programs from the perspective of rural women, who are the direct target beneficiaries.

Objectives:

1- To describe personal characteristics (age, occupation, education level, marital status and family size).
2- Determine level of participation of women in training sessions under RWS project
3- Explore the women's opinion on the relevance, usefulness of training and the degree of organization of training sessions provided under the RWS project.

Methodology:

Study area:

Umalqura locality is geographically located in the eastern part of Gezira State of the republic of the Sudan in east Africa. The area is well populated with nomadic and farmers that are mainly relying on subsistent rain fed agriculture as well as on irrigated agriculture and animal raring in the Butana grazing area. The locality has semi-arid climate, subjecting agriculture and livestock based livelihood strategies of the population to frequent shocks caused by climate and environmental changes. Health and education infrastructure in the study area are not well developed and consequently, many of the local population in the study area are illiterate and target the surrounding large cities for improved medical services.

Data collection and analysis:

Structured interview was used for data collection. Data collection instrument was divided into three sections; the first section measured the socioeconomic characteristics of women while the second section measured level of participation. The third section focused on examining the relevance of implemented activities to the needs of women. Measurement employed a three points of a likert-type scale, for each section of the questionnaire. Data was collected after employing a full count method under a census and incidental sample approach to analyze each of the responses of the participating women. In this approach, all beneficiary women of the RWS (41 participants) were interviewed by a trained enumerator. The collected data was then analyzed by descriptive frequency distribution as well as by running a correlation test to examine whether or not, there are existing significant relationships between variables investigated in the study.

Results and discussion:

Socioeconomic background of the rural women greatly influences their participation in social, cultural and economic activities. However, this study found majority of women participated in the RWS project (60%) to be less than 40 years old, who are married living in their husbands' houses, but around 20% of them are heading households because they are widowed or divorced (Table 1). Comparatively, Walaa[9] also found majority of women beneficiaries from microfinance projects to be young or less than 50 years old. Within the ethical-social framework, ability to work in a team stands out as a primary competence; however, Ortuño, De los Ríos, and Sastre-Merino, found that under analysis by age factor, economic activity, and level of schooling, have identified that a high level of self-esteem is preserved in women of 24 to 35 years of age from various areas with basic levels of study[10].

Table 1: Key socioeconomic characteristics of the participating women

Age	Frequency	Percent
Less than 20	8	19.5
20 - 39	17	41.5
40 - 59	11	26.8
60 and above	5	12.2
Total	**41**	**100.0**
Occupation		
Farmer	11	26.8
Worker	9	22.0
Housewife	13	31.7
Other	8	19.5
Total	**41**	**100.0**
Marital status		
Married	22	53.7
Single	11	26.8
Widowed	5	12.2
Divorced	3	7.3
Total	**41**	**100.0**
Family size		
3-4	19	46.3
5-7	17	41.5
More than 7	5	12.2
Total	**41**	**100.0**
Education Level		
Illiterate	6	14.6
Basic school	26	63.4
Secondary school	7	17.1
University	2	4.9
Total	**41**	**100.0**

Results also reveal that a third of women in Umalqura area (30.1%) are housewives that are not involved in any economic activity, while the remaining are economically active in agriculture, petty trade and other hired labors or working activities in agriculture and other sectors (Table 1).

Many researches in Middle East countries and in the Sudan as part found women in in some regions not to be economically active. This could be attributed to their limited access to productive resources as well as to their lack of training and education, which in turn results in women having insufficient levels of skills required to compete in the job market.

However, majority of RWS participants (63.4%) were able to secure basic education, while some 23% of them have made further progress with secondary and university education. This result gives an indicator for successful and impacting training under RWS project, as many of the women would respond positively to the guidance and training received under the project activities. Interestingly, 53.7% of women participating in these development activities are married and this is consistent with the findings of Walaa[9], that the percentage of married women benefiting from micro finance in Alkamleen locality of the Gezira State is the highest percentage among other designated group of women like widowed and divorced categories.

Table 2: Level participation in training activities provided under RWS project

Level of participation	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50% of the training activities	3	7.3%
Participated in 75% of the activities	13	31.7%
Fully participated in activities	25	61.0%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

The RWS program organized its events as per week, and majority of the participated women (61%) were able to fully participate in the activities, while 31.7% of the participated in 75% of the events. Since the level of participation is high, this result reveals that the project might have affected much in the targeted communities by transforming knowledge and skills of women to adopt best practices for home economics, human and environmental health.

Table 3: Relevance of the training topics from the perspective of the targeted women

Level of participation	Frequency	Percent
Rarely relevant	1	2.4
To some extent relevant	37	90.2
To a large extent relevant	3	7.3
Total	**41**	**100.0**

Results in Table 3 above shows that, the curriculum of the RWS was somewhat relevant to the trainees' needs and therefore meets their expectations. However, it is expected that the training would have positively impacted the knowledge and skills of the women. Chambers recommended that, development activities would have greater influence if they touch the felt needs of the target beneficiaries[11].

Table 4: Perceived usefulness of training provided in the RWS

Degree of usefulness	Frequency	Percent
Useful to some extent	12	29.3
Very useful	29	70.7
Total	**41**	**100.0**

The perceived usefulness of training sessions implemented under any development project is very important to assure effectiveness and to get people to highly be engaged in the activities. This study found 70.7% of the women perceiving the training provided in the RWS activities to be very useful for them as it meets their actual needs and knowledge gap (Table 4). Consequently, training is expected to influence positive changes in women knowledge and skills of environmental awareness, home economics and other aspects covered by the training sessions implemented.

Table 5: Training activity organization and consistency

Degree of organization	Frequency	Percent
To some extent organized	1	2.4
Very organized	40	97.6
Total	**41**	**100.0**

Table 5 above shows that, beneficiaries of the RWS perceive training activities to be very organized and implemented in a good manner (97.6%) this implies that women were very much interested and attracted by the mode of the training. However, in such condition participants are expected to have benefited too much from the training implemented.

Table 6: Correlation matrix showing the relationship between participation in RWS activities and changes in awareness, knowledge and skills of the rural women

	Level of participation
	r
Family size	-.072
Training usefulness	.332*
Positive knowledge change	.645*
Awareness raising	.129
Effectiveness	.330*
Relevance	.223*

Examining the relationship between participation in RWS activities and changes in knowledge and skills, the present study and, with reference to Davis convention[12] for interpreting correlation coefficient, found that there is significant strong positive relationship between participation and positive change in knowledge and skills of home economic, environmental health and human health practices of the participants (r=645*), it implies that the training was very much in line with the required changes, women who were much participating in activities were found to have positively changed their knowledge and improved their skills in the fields and aspects covered by training in the RWS. However, usefulness of the training is positively correlated with level of participation, as presented by correlation coefficient r=332*, presented by significant moderate correlation between the two variables. Moreover, participation in training also helps in increasing and promoting training effectiveness, as explained by correlation coefficient r= 330*, between participation and training effectiveness showing significant moderate positive relationship.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings, the study concludes that, RWS approach would give greater development impact if it will be widely adopted for development projects targeting women as one of the designated groups. Women with comparatively smaller farm size are more likely to participate in training sessions than those women with larger family size due differences in house family burdens. However, Women participants in the RWS activities showed that the project has actually impacted their level of knowledge and practice in the domains of environmental awareness, home economics, food and nutrition.

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